

Troubleshooting: Dealing with Common Writing Problems

by April Kelley

Organization

Problem: My students struggle with writing good leads.

Strategies:

1. **Multiple Leads Routine.** Have student practice writing multiple leads for their own work. Write 3-5 leads for a piece, share with a small group and ask peers to identify the leads they like best and give a reason why.

2. **Offer options.** Some students need to have a concrete list of "Ways to Begin."

- an anecdote that frames what the paper is all about
- a startling fact that will wake readers up
- a question to readers
- an intriguing quotation from someone connected to the topic
- action, action, action
- dialogue that raises the issue you will explore
- a promise to readers; e.g., "You'll be a cook within one week!"
- a striking description that sets the scene
- a striking image that provides information or sets the tone
- a summary of a problem - to which the paper offers a solution
- a profile of someone key to the story or the research

3. **Go bad on purpose.** Practice writing bad leads for one or more of the books you are reading. For example,

- *Hi, I'm E.B. White, and I want to tell you the story of Charlotte the spider and her friend Wilbur. Ready? Here we go!*
- *Do you like chocolate? In this story you'll learn about a determined boy named Charlie and the way chocolate changes his life.*

Host a "bad leads" award ceremony, where you can have some fun reading these aloud and voting for the worst of the lot: "Lead least likely to get a reader's attention," "Most action-free lead", "Most obnoxiously perky lead," and so on.

4. **Go for the kill.** Want a killer lead? You need killer detail. Weak leads are spawned by scant information. This activity yields striking results because of its

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immediacy. Students create information right on the spot and then sift through that information for a striking moment that will pull a reader in.

Ask student to interview each other in pairs for 3 minutes. Encourage them to avoid dead-end questions such as "When were you born?", "What is your middle name?" Instead, ask these kinds of questions that will result in interesting information:

- What bugs you?
- What did you fear most in your life that never actually happened?
- Where would you leads (or most) like to be stranded for a week?
- If you were afraid, what would you be?
- If you could spend a day with one person, living or dead, who would it be?
- What is the one thing most people would never guess when they first met you?
- What movie or book comes closest to describing you?

Then, ask them to pull out the most intriguing detail on which to base a lead. Read your results aloud. Compare them to some biographical leads you gather from your school library. Which are stronger?

Problem: *It's hard to follow this writing. It jumps here and there.*

Strategies:

1. **Clean the attic.** Like cleaning an attic, get rid of what you don't need, group the rest, (so that you can find something if you needed to), and figure out what's missing so that you can add to your collection.

2. **Tell it orally first.** Talking is an excellent way of organizing because it's quick and let's the speaker know if listeners are confused or following along with ease. Teachers might need to model this by thinking of something unusual, frightening, or funny that had happened to you and tell the story to your students. Then, list everything that has happened on an overhead, including a few details you don't need. List events in random order, and omit one or two important details. Ask students to eliminate what is not needed, reorder what is left, and ask questions to fill in what is missing.

3. **Plan it like a road trip.** Outlining isn't a bad idea if we use it well. An outline can keep you from getting lost. Be cautious not to become a slave to your outline as you write. Teach students to outline in general terms that will allow flexibility because each sentence or paragraph flows out of what came before. For example, if I'm writing an informational piece, my outline might look like this: (1) Opening that startles and informs the reader, (2) quick summary of the main question I mean to answer or the reason I think this topic is important, (3) 2 or 3 of the most intriguing things I learned from my research, (4) confirmation or rejection of one or two commonly held beliefs

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about this topic, (5) something to connect this topic to the reader's life so that he or she will care, (6) a closing surprise - intriguing fact, quotation, or discovery from my own research. This outline is specific enough to guide me without telling me exactly where I can or cannot go.

4. **Use graphic organizers.** Visual learners often find organizers in picture form helpful. See your write source materials for other forms of graphic organizers.

5. **Look for clues.** As we write, we create expectations in the minds of the readers - we plant seeds in the reader's minds. However, before you can learn to leave clues yourself, you must learn to look for them as you read. Ask your students to look for the clues good writers have left along the trail - clues a thoughtful readers tracks clear up to the ending. A good ending may not be happy, but it always feels right and always grows out of what has come before.

6. **Give "beginning, middle, and end" a face lift.** We know that a beginning is a lead that hooks the reader's attention and an ending is a resolution to the problem. The middle is the writer's way of answering questions or expanding ideas raised by the lead, and guiding the reader toward the intended resolution. Barry Lane suggests the following:

Beginning: *Set-up* what follows, simultaneously drawing the reader in.

Middle: *Explore* by expanding the main message - and pulling the reader in deeper. Present problems and proposed solutions, details the reader needs for understanding, explanations, complexities, the little details (zooming in), counter-arguments, or (in the case of narrative the unraveling plot. Move forward through action, character development, information, or argument. Then, zap--

Ending: *Wrap it up.* End with a revelation, resolution of the conflict or problem, discovery, moment of truth. Say goodbye.

Problem: Transitions are weak or missing altogether.

Strategies:

1. ***Invent your own transitions.*** Choose a published piece and rewrite it taking out all the transitions. Ask students to fill in transitional words and phrases that make sense. This will help students understand the importance of connecting ideas.

2. ***Brainstorm a list of good transitional words and phrases.*** However, In a while, Therefore, Next, Because of that, In fact, On the other hand, To tell the truth, For

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example, Nevertheless, and so forth. Make a poster from which student writers can "borrow" when they need a way to link ideas. For a longer more complete list, see Write Source 2000.

Problem: Conclusion is missing. It just stops or it's the dreaded "dream ending."

Strategies:

1. ***Imagine yourself saying goodbye.*** A good ending gracefully says goodbye to the reader and it just feels right. Think about the way you'd say goodbye at the door after visiting with a friend. You might comment on what you learned or suggest something interesting that you might do the next time you get together.

2. ***Talk about specific ways to end.*** Use your own experience along with what you learn from professional writers. Make and post a list:

- something the writer has learned
- something the writer regrets
- a hint of what's to come
- the writer's emotional response or observation
- a comment on how things have changed
- a stirring image
- a telling conversation
- an unexpected twist or revelation
- an echo of the lead (coming full circle)
- the answer to a question the reader has likely been pondering

3. ***Invent your own bad endings for books you or your students are reading.*** There is much to be learned by reminding yourself how not to do it. Host a "Bad Conclusions" contest. Some examples:

- Then I woke up and it was all a dream. There was no scarlet letter, after all.
- I hope you liked my book and learned a lot about wizards...
- So Stanley and all the Yelnatses lived happily ever after...

4. ***Use the power of the sequel.*** Take the ending from one piece of writing and use it to craft the lead for a sequel. After practicing this strategy, your students can use it to test their own endings. If a conclusion is too dead to give life to a new piece, it probably needs work.

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